

Book Review and Author Interview: Island Story: Journeys Around Unfamiliar Britain by J.D. Taylor

 blogs.lse.ac.uk/lseviewofbooks/2016/08/19/book-review-and-author-interview-island-story-journeys-around-unfamiliar-britain-by-j

8/19/2016

What is life really like for those who inhabit the island we call the UK? Island Story: Journeys Around Unfamiliar Britain presents J.D. Taylor's attempt to find out. Accompanied by a tent and travelling on a rusty bike, Taylor travelled around Britain, meeting strangers and talking to people in his attempt to capture a sense of modern-day Britain at a time of ostensible malaise, cynicism and alienation. Stephen Lee Naish praises this poetic mixture of travelogue, class polemic, fable and myth for drawing out the UK's complexities and contradictions, and speaks to Taylor about the impetus behind his illuminating 'journey around unfamiliar Britain'.

Island Story: Journeys Around Unfamiliar Britain. J.D Taylor. Repeater Books. 2016.

When writer J.D Taylor began his bicycle odyssey around the United Kingdom in 2014, documenting his journey via the blog [Searching for Albion](#), I was at once jealous of the endeavour and gutted that I hadn't been the one to first conceive of the idea. I was, and still am, a keen cyclist, though I detest the lycra-clad speed freaks who have whizzed past me on countless roads with what looks like little effort on their part. Taylor's methods of purchasing a cheap second-hand bike, a shoddy tent and packing a few spare shorts and t-shirts suited my own biking philosophy and my preference for gonzo-like adventurism.

When Taylor began his journey I was also incredibly homesick. I had not long moved from Leicester, the town where I was born and had never left, to Kingston, a city in the province of Ontario, Canada, with my wife and our young son. My yearning for home at the time was intensive. Though in retrospect, I don't know why. We had left the UK because my wife (who is Canadian) had lost her job in the cultural sector; unbeknown to me at the time, I was six months away from losing my own job at Waterstones Bookshop. The Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition government had begun to decimate the health service and the education system, libraries were closing every week, shops that had been a staple of the high street for decades were gone. In their place, pound shops, pawnbrokers, pay day loan and betting shops filled the vacant retail lots. Austerity measures were in full swing, and the prospect of raising a child, or even being able to afford to raise a child, within this landscape filled us with dread.



Apart from missing my friends and family, I felt somehow relieved as the airplane made its ascent out of British airspace. Of course I still longed for home and its various vices. A pack of Wotsits, a decent pub, Jaffa Cakes, a good spicy curry, Robinsons cordial: all these things were eluding me in my new home and their absence made the first year in Canada a tough slog. Taylor's blog, for good or ill, gave me little hints of what life was like back home.

So it's no surprise to see the *Searching for Albion* blog economised into book form. Taylor's first book, *Negative Capitalism* (Zero Books, 2013), came from an astute intellect with a powerful and convincing vocabulary in his arsenal. Taylor brings these strengths to his second book, *Island Story: Journeys Around Unfamiliar Britain*, but advances further, weaving together travelogue, socio-economic and political commentary, modern histories, fable and urban myth into a poetic prose that creates a highly realist portrait of modern Britain.



Image Credit: Yellowbox ([DaveBleasdale CC2.0](#))

Of course, touring the UK (or any country for that matter) on a set of two wheels is nothing new. There are countless books that document this experience. But most of them are about the journey, the rider's mindset and their love of the machine that keeps them moving and guides them, less about the interludes of rest where locals observe and ask questions, where joints ache and muscles spasm in the aftermath of a fifty-mile jaunt. The bicycle in *Island Story* is simply a means to an end. A way of getting from one insight and encounter to another. However, the bicycle also provides an immersive mode of transportation that allows the reader the chance to flow through the landscape alongside Taylor.

When not pushing pedals, Taylor rests in pubs, cafes and hostels, talking with random strangers about their towns and history, their lives. This provides the most eloquent observations, not only from Taylor but also from the locals themselves, who find thoughtfulness and reflection in whatever failures and victories are dealt to their existences. There is little resistance: people want to open up and talk about their circumstances, their hopes and fears for the present and the future. Most conversations begin with variations of 'there's not much round here' or 'we used to make things here' (in whatever local dialect those sentences take), and it's clear that parts of the UK are now economic wastelands devoid of employment, of a unique culture, of any hope. Yet there is still kindness and humanity to be found in these small forgotten pockets. I lost count of how many free drinks, pearls of wisdom, directions and advice Taylor received along the way (and he probably omitted far more than what has been included).

This particular trip was taken during the dying years of the UK Coalition government. The Union was already at this point preparing for a Scottish referendum; the recent European Union referendum was under discussion as David Cameron manoeuvred for his next term as Prime Minister. Yet oddly, the divisions and narratives that have recently broken the UK from the EU are hardly evident in Taylor's travels. The blame and finger-pointing towards immigrants crops up on occasion, but mostly the anger people feel about the state of their towns, their jobs and their lives is directed south towards London (or, in the case of the Scottish Highlands, towards Edinburgh and Glasgow), and at government policies past and present.

As Taylor moves up North, the grim realities laid out in George Orwell's *Road to Wigan Pier* are transferred to our modern condition; things have certainly changed since 1937, but the poverty, dissatisfaction and discontent were

allowed to return during the Thatcher years and continue to get much worse for many. When Taylor rides into the Scottish heartlands, he encounters many who wish to separate Scotland from the Union for these very reasons. In fact, Taylor's excursion up into the Scottish wilderness makes for the most engaging part of the book. Without the distractions, Taylor's prose erupts into a wholly different arena of observation and encounters. The beauty of the landscape, the kindness of the people and the near silence of the surroundings offer a truly remarkable portion of *Island Story's* whole.

Island Story is complex, yet crystal clear in its prose. The book shows the many contradictions of the British psyche, which is as rugged and as changeable as the landscape, as incoherent and messy as the countless forms of architecture that rub up against each other in every British city, as diverse as the dialects and accents that change from region to region. It could be read in many ways: as a riveting travelogue in the traditions of Alfred Wainwright, Bill Bryson or Iain Sinclair's thoughtful and insightful journeys; as a sociological and anthropological analysis of British traditions that offers wider coverage than Kate Fox's *Watching the English*; a modern socio-political class polemic parallel to Lynsey Hanley's *Estates*, Owen Jones's *Chavs* or Owen Hatherley's *New Kind of Bleak*; and as observations of contemporary life that is somehow shaped by the past. Anyway you choose, *Island Story* is *our* story, and a magnificent accomplishment.

An Interview with J.D Taylor, author of *Island Story*



Image Credit: English Pub (Ben Cremin CC2.0)

Q: Why did you feel the need to partake in this journey in the first place?

I'd begun to feel an unshakeable doubt and uncertainty about the strength of my own politics. I don't know what broke me, but I was 27, and had been working for about a year on a PhD working on political questions of desire and collective identity. I'd not long published a book called *Negative Capitalism*, which anticipated like many around 2011-12 the inevitability of a popular, youth-led revolt against austerity spending cuts and neoliberal governance. Over 2013 it became clear that the Left's own beliefs about these questions weren't satisfactorily accounting for a sense of disorientation, malaise and cynicism about political ideas, amounting to an acquiescence, if not complicity, in the begrudging acceptance of the 'reality' of such austerity. Such doubt is troubling but creative. I distrust anyone

with the stubbornness of conviction.

My uncertainty about my own views prompted me to question their origins: a pot-pourri of second-hand theories and my own personal experiences, gleaned and at times hard-earned as a young wage-slave Londoner, steeped in the sourness of being forever skint, of being a social housing tenant, of being a frontline support worker. The latter were mine, and though most common among friends, rarely found themselves into print. Why? Well ... of course, the vast majority of people are now excluded from politics, not merely by the disinformation served up by the BBC or *The Sun*, but also by the professionalisation of its language into rarefied theoretical terms. I had less and less time for opinions and thought-pieces, I felt that there was far more value in experience. How could I understand the political hopes or desires of others if I did not first know their stories? To do that, I'd need to speak with and understand the experiences of a vast range of people not like me.

I don't think that many on the Left realise the dangers of being surrounded by people from the same social background as you, repeating your own views, cursing the same politicians or xenophobic brainwashed (unwashed?) masses. It leads to a highly misleading optimism about the universality and inevitability of one's own politics. I wanted to hear instead the accounts of fishermen and farmers, nurses and soldiers, factory and warehouse workers. I wanted to speak to and understand the very many depoliticised men and women, young and old, who consider themselves for whatever reason 'working' or 'middle class', who work or who cannot, or choose not to, those who own their own homes or do not have one, those who have UK citizenship or have been denied it. They had been left behind. They had had no say in the neoliberal turn of the last thirty years. They had not been consulted about the free movement of labour and capital that mirrored the free movement of public assets into private hands. They were far more angry, and bereft of political hope, than I had expected.

Q: Why was it essential to use a bicycle for this journey?

I wanted to see and hear the country for myself. The bike was the medium best suited for this. I was skint, but had enough time and a small store of savings from a PhD scholarship supporting me and my then-partner. It was a start. Just as I was interested in the vast majority of people left out of London-focused narratives, so I was interested in the places between or behind official narratives of 'England', 'The North', 'Scotland', etc. On a bike, one drinks in the entire journey. One can pull over at any point on the road to eat some grub, grab the ear of a passer-by or piss behind a bush. It had a lot recommending it.

Q: Where there any points in the journey where you thought 'enough is enough. I'm going home'? What convinced you to continue?

I never felt like giving up, strange as it seems, given the difficulties I encountered. I was compelled by a feeling of necessity and fate. I was going to complete this regardless of what happened, and that perhaps I had even already completed it, and was now reliving it again and documenting it. Even where I was injured by careless drivers, or became exhausted by long nights of lotus eating or foregoing sleep, I felt a certainty that this was going to happen, an intuition not dissimilar to the words or gestures of being in love, where one speaks or acts from the heart what feels right, and finds for a brief time in another the one companion matched for this electric connection. An adrenaline rush with a gambler's misplaced certainty. Of course it was very unlikely I was going to succeed, and that also energised me.

Q: You briefly mention meeting the young British actor, Thomas Turgoose, working as a bartender in a northern pub. That was quite a shocking moment in the book, to see a talented and well-known young man in such circumstances. What were your own impressions of this?

Tom Turgoose is known for playing Shaun in the film *This is England*, a troubled young guy who finds friendship and community among a group of disaffected young skinheads in an ex-industrial Northern town, partly based on Nottingham. It was apt to find him pulling cheap pints of bland beer in a rough-and-tumble Grimsby boozer. His situation mirrored that of his character, enduring and not unhappy in a place and position familiar to many born in the

late 1980s-early 1990s in Britain. He was sceptical, sharp-humoured and open-minded, and we talked for a bit. He deserves more work and accolades but, in a heartbreaking way, so do so many talented young people whose interests have been abandoned by a reactionary political establishment. I am thinking here of the many musicians, artists, writers, actors, educators and community workers I have had the fortune to call friends. They struggle on, flinty-humoured and hard-bitten, ambivalent about it all, highly educated and prematurely aged. They deserve much more than this.

Q: The Raleigh bike you purchased for seventy pounds at times becomes its own, quite sadistic, character within the book. It sometimes feels like the thing is holding you back with its many imperfections. Why didn't you go with a more expensive, or at the least, more reliable bike?

No, the old Raleigh bike is the hero of the book! It just about held it together over those thousand or so miles. I consciously wanted to distance myself from the lycra-clad, middle-class professionalisation of cycling, just as I sought a similar distance from the professionalisation of politics and political theory. Using a cheap everyday road bike mirrored that of taking and using the stories and language of real individuals, as they are. And of course I was skint, and couldn't afford much better! But I wanted to show what could be done, and focus on the journey rather than the tedious data of mileage or performance that distract so many cyclists. So I didn't have a milometer, I wore jeans and a shirt, a harrington when it rained (until that fell off the bike too), and just got on with it. And I regret nothing at all.

Stephen Lee Naish is the author of the essay collection *U.ESS.AY: Politics and Humanity in American Film* (Zero Books) and new book *Create or Die: Essays on the Artistry of Dennis Hopper* (Amsterdam University Press).

Note: This review and interview gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.

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